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ABSTRACT

The role of cognitions in marital relationships has received increasing attention. Specific beliefs about marital relationships have shown consistent correlations with overall marital satisfaction. As a measure of dysfunctional beliefs about intimate relationships, the Relationship Belief Inventory provides five dysfunctional beliefs scores. This study extended research in the area of unrealistic beliefs and marital satisfaction in two ways. The first was the development of an additional measure of Beliefs About Relationship Change. The second focus of this research was the use of a multidimensional measure of marital satisfaction in response to the call for mapping of different beliefs and different domains of marital interaction/satisfaction. Married couples (N=36) participated in the study. Multiple regression procedures showed that: global marital distress is predicted by dysfunctional beliefs that the included partners are unable to change, disagreement is destructive, and the sexes are dramatically different. The Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory demonstrated preliminary promise as a measure of dysfunctional beliefs and the pattern of correlations supported the need for continued efforts to identify between specific beliefs and areas of marital distress. The application of cognitive models to marital problems is a promising area for increasing the effectiveness of marital therapy. (Author/ABL)

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Dysfunctional Cognitions and Marital Satisfaction:
A Multidimensional Analysis

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Abstract

Specific dysfunctional beliefs (measured by the Relationship Beliefs Inventory and the Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory) were related to different areas of marital satisfaction (as measured by the Marital Satisfaction Inventory). Thirty-six married couples completed the scales. Multiple regression procedures showed that global marital distress was predicted by dysfunctional beliefs that included partners are unable to change, disagreement is destructive, and the sexes are dramatically different. The Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory demonstrated preliminary promise as a measure of dysfunctional beliefs and the pattern of correlations supported the need for continued efforts to identify linkages between specific beliefs and areas of marital distress.

Dysfunctional Cognitions and Marital Satisfaction:

A Multidimensional Analysis

"Cognitive therapy is designed to help couples...clear their thinking and communication so as to prevent the misunderstandings from arising in the first place" (Beck, 1988, p. 3). As Epstein and colleagues (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989, Eidelson & Epstein, 1982, Epstein, 1986, Epstein & Eidelson, 1981) have documented, the role of cognitions in marital relationships has received increasing attention. Specific beliefs about marital relationships have shown consistent correlations with overall marital satisfaction.

As a measure of dysfunctional beliefs about intimate relationships, the Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI, Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) provides five scores. These are 1) Disagreement is Destructive (D), 2) Mindreading is Expected (M), 3) Partners Cannot Change (C), 4) Sexual Perfectionism is a Must (P), and 5) The Sexes are Dramatically Different (MF). These dysfunctional beliefs have been shown to be consistently correlated with global measures of marital satisfaction or marital distress, as measured by the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959), Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1972), and Snyder's Marital Satisfaction Inventory Global Distress Scale (1979), for both clinical and non-clinical samples of married couples (see Table 1).

The authors of the RBI were clear to point out that the RBI "... was not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of all important dysfunctional relationship beliefs" (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982, p. 719). Thus, research that identified other important categories of dysfunctional relationship beliefs could provide "...increased delineation of important categories of marital

cognitions" as called for in a recent review of cognitions and marital relationships (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989, p. 31).

This same review recommended that "...the various types of cognitions must be differentiated, and the relations between these cognitive variables and marital distress must be made clear" (p. 36). To clarify these relations, not only is it important to develop more comprehensive ways to measure and subsequently classify cognitions, but also it is important to delineate specific areas of marital functioning. It makes sense, although not supported empirically, that specific dysfunctional beliefs should differentially impact on specific areas of marital satisfaction/distress, and reciprocally, satisfaction/distress on beliefs.

The present study extended research in the area of unrealistic beliefs and marital satisfaction in two ways. The first was the development of an additional measure of Beliefs About Relationship Change. This measure was developed in response to the call for more comprehensive assessment of dysfunctional beliefs and because of the centrality ascribed to this belief in cognitive marital therapies (cf. Beck, 1988). The second focus of this research was the use of a multidimensional measure of marital satisfaction in response to the call for mapping of different beliefs and different domains of marital interaction/satisfaction. Beliefs were measured through the use of the Relationship Belief Inventory and the Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory, and dimensions of marital satisfaction were measured by the Marital Satisfaction Inventory.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-six married couples participated in the study. The mean age was 35.33 (S.D. = 12.38) (ranging from 21 to 76). They had been married an average of 12.52 (S.D. = 13.36) years with 1.72 children (ranging from 0 to 5). All couples were administered three inventories: the Relationship Belief Inventory, the Beliefs about Relationship Change Inventory, and the Marital Satisfaction Inventory.

The Relationship Belief Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) is a forty-item measure of five dysfunctional relationship beliefs. These include: Disagreement is Destructive (D), Mindreading is Expected (M), Partners Cannot Change (C), Sexual Perfectionism is a Must (S), and the Sexes are Dramatically Different (MF). Each belief is measured by eight items using a six-point scale. Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for the five RBI scales ranged from .72 to .81, and validity relationships were found with the Irrational Belief Test and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

The Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory (BRCI) was taken from items identified in Aaron Beck's 1988 book, Love is Never Enough. The BRCI explores the beliefs held about the spouse and the marriage in four areas: 1) Defeatist Beliefs (14 items) - e.g. "My marriage is dead," 2) Self-Justifying Beliefs (4 items) - e.g. "It's normal to behave the way I do," 3) Reciprocity Arguments (5 items) - e.g. "I won't make an effort unless my partner does," and 4) The Problem is My partner (8 items) - e.g. "I had no problems in my life until we were married." Each of the 31 statements was

answered on a six-point scale ranging from "I strongly believe that the statement is false" to "I strongly believe that this statement is true."

The Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1979) was developed as an attempt to provide a reliable and valid self-report measure of marital interaction for use in both research and clinical settings. The 280 items, measuring aspects of married life, are divided into 11 scales. The scales are CONVENTIONALISM (CNV), GLOBAL DISTRESS (GDS), AFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (AFC), PROBLEM SOLVING COMMUNICATION (PSC), TIME TOGETHER (TTO), DISAGREEMENT ABOUT FINANCES (FIN), SEXUAL DISSATISFACTION (SEX), ROLE ORIENTATION (ROR), FAMILY HISTORY OF DISTRESS (FAM), DISSATISFACTION WITH CHILDREN (DSC), CONFLICT OVER CHILDREARING (CCR). The husband and wife report their feelings to each statement by answering "True or False." The individual responses are scored on the 11 scales of the inventory, including one validity scale (CNV), one global affective scale (GDS), and additional scales measuring specific dimensions of marital interaction. Except for the validity and role-orientation scale, all scales are scored in the direction of discontent so that high scores indicate high levels of dissatisfaction within the specific area.

Analyses have been conducted that confirm both the internal consistency and stability (test-retest reliability) of the individual scales on the MSI. Coefficients generally confirm the high internal consistency of individual scales ranging from .80 (DSC) to .97 (GDJ) with a mean coefficient of .88. Results indicate a high degree of interrelatedness among scales, particularly those assessing more global or affective components of the marital relationship.

Procedure

An opportunistic sample of married couples was sought by three of the researchers. Packets containing the three measures were given to each spouse, completed individually by each spouse, and returned to the researcher at a later date either personally or through the mail.

Results

Results are reported in several ways. Descriptive statistics for all measures, psychometric data for the BRCI, correlations between cognitive measures and overall marital distress, correlations between cognitive measures and specific domains of marital satisfaction, and multiple regression analyses are reported. Means and standard deviations for the five scales of the RBI, the total score for the BRCI, and the eleven scores of the MSI are reported in Table 2.

Internal consistency reliability coefficients for the BRCI total score was $\alpha = .768$. Scale reliability coefficients were BRCI - Defeatist Beliefs ($\alpha = .781$), BRCI - Self-Justifying Beliefs ($\alpha = .648$), BRCI - Reciprocity Arguments ($\alpha = .485$), and BRCI - The Problem is My Partner ($\alpha = .634$). Correlations between overall marital distress (MSI scores) and specific dysfunctional beliefs from the RBI and BRCI are reported in Table 3.

The five dysfunctional beliefs from the RBI and the total score from the BRCI were entered into a stepwise multiple regression to predict marital distress (MSI - GDS) for the combined sample of husbands and wives. The total score for the BRCI was chosen because of the lack of significant correlations among BRCI subscales and MSI scales. This procedure resulted in four significant predictors as seen in Table 4. Separate multiple regression

procedures by sex resulted in two predictor variable solutions (BRCI and RBI-MF for males and RBI-D and BRCI for females).

Discussion

The BRCI, a measure developed directly from a checklist by Aaron Beck, showed adequate internal consistency reliability for the total scale and acceptable internal consistency for three of the subscales. The total scale scores were strongly associated with scores from the Marital Satisfaction Inventory. Thus, it appears that belief in the change potential of a relationship may be a strong determinant of marital satisfaction, as indicated by the results of multiple regression analysis. The BRCI does not appear to be redundant with the RBI--Partners Cannot Change subscale since there was only a moderate correlation of .563 between RBI-C and BRCI scores. Thus, as an attempt to expand measures of cognitive beliefs that relate to marital satisfaction, the BRCI shows some initial potential. Further analysis will continue to examine validity of the BRCI.

The second purpose of the study, the mapping of different cognitive beliefs and specific areas of marital satisfaction, revealed an interesting pattern of correlations. Overall marital distress was most correlated with BRCI, RBI-D, and RBI-MF and was best predicted by a combination of BRCI, RBI-D, S, and MF.

The belief that disagreement is destructive seems to impact on a number of areas of marital interaction, especially problems with affective and problem-solving communication. The belief that mindreading is expected related most highly with problems with problem-solving communication. The belief that partners cannot change from the RBI related moderately with problems in a

number of marital interaction areas (affective and problem solving-communication, time together, finances, dissatisfaction with children, and disagreement about childrearing practices). The belief that partners cannot change from the BRCI showed high correlations with distress with affective and problem-solving communication, time together, and finances and moderate correlations with the two child areas. The belief in sexual perfectionism did not significantly correlate with any marital area including sexual dissatisfaction. The belief that the sexes are dramatically different was most related to distress with affective and problem-solving communication and dissatisfaction with children.

The dysfunctional belief that disagreement is destructive seems to impact primarily on couple communication. The dysfunctional belief that spouses are stable and not capable or motivated to change seems to impact nearly all areas of the marriage, including parenting. This is also true of the dysfunctional belief in the dramatic differences between the sexes.

The BRCI, as a promising measure of change potential, may be tapping into the area of attributions. Research has demonstrated that couples make attributions consistent with their predominant affect toward the partner (Truax & Jacobson, 1989). Thus, a relation between a measure that taps into attributions would be expected to relate highly to a measure of marital distress.

The findings from this research represent a beginning attempt to tie specific dysfunctional beliefs to specific areas of marital distress. An additional measure of dysfunctional beliefs showed promise for future use in research.

The application of cognitive models to marital problems is a promising area for increasing the effectiveness of marital therapy. Further research is needed that provides direction for the therapist about which dysfunctional cognitions need to be targeted for what marital problems.

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Table 1

Correlations of RBI with Marital Satisfaction/Distress

Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale			
Epstein & Eidelson (1981)		Eidelson & Epstein (1982)	
n=94, clinical sample		n=96, clinical	n=104, nonclinical
Relationship Belief Inventory Scales			
1. Disagreement (D)	-.27*	-.40*	-.43*
2. Mindreading (M)	-.22*	-.28*	-.19*
3. Change (C)	-.38*	-.53*	n.s.
4. Sexual Perfectionism (P)	(not tested)	-.33*	-.21*
5. Male-Female Differences (MF)	(not tested)	-.26*	-.25

Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale		
Epstein, Pretzer, & Fleming (1987)		
	n=78, mixed males	n=78, mixed females
1. Disagreement (D)	-.54*	-.54*
2. Mindreading (M)	-.47*	n.s.

Marital Satisfaction Inventory - Global Distress Scale		
Jones & Stanton (1988)		
	n=45, nonclinical males	n=45, nonclinical females
1. Disagreement (D)	n.s.	.48*
2. Mindreading (M)	n.s.	.30*
3. Change (C)	n.s.	.36*
4. Sexual Perfectionism (P)	n.s.	.31*
5. Male-Female Differences (MF)	.41*	n.s.

*p ≤ .05

Table 2Means and Standard Deviations for RBI, BRCI, and MSI

<u>Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI)</u>	Mean	S.D.
1. Disagreement (D)	11.76	7.34
2. Mindreading (M)	13.44	5.64
3. Change (C)	10.33	5.53
4. Sexual Perfectionism (P)	14.58	5.66
5. Sexes are Different (MF)	17.33	5.10
<u>Beliefs About Relationship Change Inventory (BRCI)</u>		
	57.06	11.63
<u>Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI)</u>		
1. Conventionalism	9.47	5.56
2. Global Distress Scale	5.89	7.22
3. Affective Communication	6.86	4.90
4. Problem-Solving Communication	10.21	8.54
5. Time Together	5.28	4.21
6. Disagreement About Finances	4.39	4.11
7. Sexual Dissatisfaction	8.81	5.98
8. Role Orientation	15.92	5.27
9. Family History of Distress	5.58	3.93
10. Dissatisfaction with Children	3.04	3.20
11. Conflict over Childrearing	2.25	2.78

Table 3

Correlations Between Marital Satisfaction Inventory Scales and Dysfunctional Beliefs

	<u>MSI</u>									
	GDS	AFC	PSC	TTO	FIN	SEX	ROR	FAM	DSC	CCR
<u>RBI</u>										
1. D	.502**	.448**	.549**	.255*	.297*	.229*	-.027	.155	.082	.202
2. M	.306*	.254*	.404**	.154	.300*	.087	-.019	.127	.033	.108
3. C	.324**	.373**	.330**	.344**	.372**	.122	.052	.061	.328**	.354**
4. S	.018	.108	.103	.071	.037	.217	-.217	-.101	.109	.157
5. MF	.420**	.452**	.423**	.246*	.194	.204	-.079	.188	.339**	.191
<u>BRCI</u>										
Total	.534**	.578**	.555**	.525**	.525**	.137	-.091	.087	.315**	.349**
Subscales										
1. Defeatist Beliefs	.040	-.064	.018	-.148	-.070	-.087	-.093	.011	-.056	-.115
2. Self-Justifying Beliefs	-.158	-.121	-.171	-.231	-.062	-.169	.382**	-.143	-.080	-.143
3. Reciprocity Arguments	-.211	-.214	-.208	-.213	-.127	-.121	-.184	-.105	-.111	-.147
4. Problem is My Partner	.096	-.005	.064	-.088	.030	-.078	-.185	.014	-.073	-.180

**p ≤ .01

*p ≤ .05

Table 4Regression Analysis for Marital Satisfaction Inventory - Global Distress Scale

Variable	Multiple r	r	r increment
1. BRCI	.534	.286	
2. RBI-D	.633	.401	.115
3. RBI-S	.671	.451	.050
4. RBI-MF	.705	.497	.046